



Creative Writing

Poetry and Surrealism

Bill Greenwell

Ian McMillan told me about his love of surrealism and his use of it in two of his poems.

Ian McMillan

This one's called the Meaning of Life, it's a Yorkshire Dialect Rhapsody. The idea of this is that I got fed up of people showing me Yorkshire dialect poems that didn't apparently make any sense. So I thought I'll write one that don't make any sense at all and yet the more I read it the more it appears to mean something.

From under t'canal like a watter-filled cellar
coming up like a pitman from a double'un, twice,
I said 'Hey, you're looking poorly'
He said 'Them nights are drawing in'

Down't stairs like a gob-machine, sucking toffees,
up a ladder like a ferret up a ladder in a fog,
I said, 'Hey, you're looking poorly'
He said 'Half a dozen eggs'

Over't top in't double-decker groaning like a whippet
like a lamp lighter's daughter in a barrel-full of milk,
I said 'Hey, you're looking poorly'
He said 'Night's a dozen eggs'

Down t'canal like a barrow full of Gillis's parsnips
coming up like a cage of men in lit-up shiny hats,
I said 'Hey, you're looking poorly'
He said 'Half a dozen nights'

Under t'canal on a pushbike glowing like an eggshell
Up a ladder wi' a pigeon and a broken neck,
I said 'Hey, you're looking poorly'
He said 'I feel like half a dozen eggs'

Over t'night on a shiny bike wi' a lit-up hat,
Perfect for't poorly wi' heads like eggs.
I said, 'Hey, you died last week'
He said 'Aye, did you miss me?'

[Laughter] And that's just full of them Yorkshire dialect clichés that you get.

Bill Greenwell

But it's also, it also works because it has that repetitive incantatory quality that you were ascribing to psalms and hymns and it's like a subversive phantom and what I like about it is the ghostliness of it.

Ian McMillan

That's right, "I said, 'Hey, you died last week', He said, 'Aye, did you miss me?'" partly because a lot of these kind of older dialect poems, not just Yorkshire dialect, at the end, you know, the protagonist is dead and I like the idea of the ghostly meeting. And just that

repetition, you know, 'Hey, you're looking poorly', 'Half a dozen eggs' 'Night's a dozen eggs', 'Half a dozen nights' 'I feel like half a dozen eggs'. That, 'Perfect for't poorly wi' heads like eggs'. I wrote it straight out, there was no revision in that, I just wrote it so it was a kind of riff, I got into it, and then afterwards you think Yeah, perhaps it is about all sorts of things, you know, 'Coming up like a cage of men in lit-up shiny hats', that's people coming out the pit. 'Up a ladder wi' a pigeon and a broken neck', just this idea, just this kind of lonely bloke half way up a ladder outside a terraced house, there's a pigeon flying round him, he's got a broken neck so he don't work at the pit anymore, but yeah, the repetition, the incantatory nature of it gives it a kind of power, yeah, it does.

Bill Greenwell

Do you enjoy coming up with these kinds of what might be called surrealist connections between two things?

Ian McMillan

Yeah. I love surrealist connections. I think it's, partly because I get bored with poems that tell me things that are kind of fairly obvious. You know, sometimes, you'll read a poem, you think Well, actually, you're making a very small point there, and a stand-up comedian could have made it better or a journalist could have made it better. What I'd rather have is poets who really want to play with language and really want to mess about with language and who want to say, Look, language is a completely free thing and I'm here to play. If you want to make small poems, tell me jokes. But if you want to play with language, then let's write a poem. Trust those moments when something happens, you got no idea where it comes from. Write them down. Put them down because that's your brain making connections, because you've read a lot of poems, because you've spent your life looking at poems, reading a poem, that doesn't mean your connections have to be laborious, your connections can become instinctive, I think.

Bill Greenwell

There's a wonderful analogy of years passing which you imagine to be a colossal and mind-bending event but you actually described as being like somebody almost at the end of a bag of crisps.

Ian McMillan

Yes. [Laughs] Well, I'll tell what that was, the poem's called I'd Better Not. Because I couldn't think of a title for it. And I rang my mate who was going to publish it in a magazine, I said, 'Look, I've got a poem here but I just can't think of a title for it. Can you give me title?' He said 'I'd better not'. I said, 'Thanks'. And I just love that randomness.

A man leaned over to a man in a pub
And said in a voice
'I used to be thirty seven but now I'm fifty one'.
And that's how the years go.
In handfuls.
Like somebody is almost at the end of a bag of crisps
And they tip the bag up
And it's as though they're drinking crisps.
That's how the years go.

And that was again from something that happened. I was sat on a bus, and this man turned to his mate and he said 'I used to be thirty seven, now I'm fifty one.' And I thought, God, that's right. But it turned out he was talking about his tote numbers. [Laughter] At the club. But it don't matter, does it? That doesn't matter. You know, thirty, what a great line. Then I thought, I always find it interesting, when you're in a pub, and people buy a bag of crisps and they kind of get to the end and instead of putting their hand in the crisps, they kind of bang the bottom of the bag of crisps to knock the crisps into their mouth. And I thought, that's how the years go by, you know, I'm fifty two, and I was thirty seven five minutes ago. It wasn't as though I was searching for an image, but it was one of those things – I think it's because you have to walk about in a state of alertness, and a state of receptivity, and a state of being prepared to be surprised by joy, because if you can walk about and see somebody eating

some crisps and, without laboriously thinking about it, think that's what years are like, that's the way to go. And I think you should, you should always be there with a notebook, always write stuff down, things that seem irrelevant. If you don't write it down, you forget. You get home, you think, had a great idea, what was it? But if you write it down, then it's going to be there, and then you'll come back to it and it will have altered, I've kept notebooks of mine for years. And you look through them and you think, Well, what was that? And sometimes it reminds you of something. So, yeah, always keep a notebook, I recommend.

Bill Greenwell

We've been talking about analogies, similes, metaphors in poetry. And we've been talking about repetition in poetry. But do you think that prose needs to have analogies and repetitions as well?

Ian McMillan

Yeah. I think prose, the best prose, my favourite prose writers, my two favourite prose writers are American. John Cheever and Joan Didion. John Cheever is the most fantastic writer because he, his prose is rhythmic, he repeats, he does long lines, he does kind of mystical lines like, he says, 'It came from a time when New York was lit by a river light and almost everyone wore a hat'...

Bill Greenwell

This could easily have come from a poem.

Ian McMillan

From a poem because it's got that rhythm to it. He's got a great story called 'Oh City of Broken Dreams' that just keeps repeating, these little lines repeated, and the reason they stay in our head, you know, those lines, because they are like poems, cos that's what poems do so yeah, I think prose can be rhythmic and it can repeat.

Bill Greenwell

When I hear you read, I always hear much more repetition in a poem than I'd realised was originally there. [laughter] And I think some of the most successful poems are poems in which the repetition and the resonance is not just in a single line but in an image which is played with, which is rifted with as we were discussing and there's a great poem in your collection Perfect Catch called Flat Bull.

Ian McMillan

I'll read the poem first then I'll talk about it. Flat Bull.

Excess baggage
they wanted to call it
But I insisted it was hand luggage.
They compromised.
It sat next to me
On the plane back to England,
The flat bull.
At home, I kept it in the garden
Where it wandered about
Flatly.
Sometimes you could see it.
Sometimes it was just a line against the trees.
Mr Lowe next door was doing his garden.
'What's that?' he said, his flat cap just above the hedge.
'It's a flat bull' I said.
'I brought it back from Mexico.'
That night he tried to fight it
Rushing at it with his fork
Losing his flat cap
Breaking his glasses
Shouting and grunting

His wife watching from the window
Doing the ironing.

Bill Greenwell

[Laughter] What I love about that is the way in which the ironing and the flat cap are suddenly and surprisingly moved into the poem. Where did that one come from Ian?

Ian McMillan

I did a tour of Mexico in 1997. One of the things we found was this, it was an advert for a kind of Tequila and you're driving out of Mexico City and there's this, and you see what appears to be something flat and it's a bull and it's completely, it's a flat bull and you drive up to it and you turn the corner, there it is. You can see the whole thing, this flat bull. Spent ages walking across the grass to this flat bull and we got to this flat bull and it was huge, bigger than it looked from the road, this massive flat bull. And then I found the flat bull kind of invaded my dreams while I was in Mexico, it became the symbol of Mexico for me, this flat bull. And then I thought I'd just have a little kind of fantasy, I thought What if I brought it back? And then it was that idea about when you get home, I find, if I do these trips abroad which I don't do very often, but if you go abroad, I find there's no point when I get home, telling them about it. Because their lives have been going on, you know, the wife, the kids, 'Oh, I've just been to Mexico, guess what I saw?' They're not bothered, they're, couldn't care less. So you end up going 'I saw a flat bull', [laughs] you know, and they're going ... forget it. So, and Mr Lowe next door, he's still there, Mr Lowe, my next door neighbour, wonderful man, nice guy and I thought, 'What if Mr Lowe saw the flat bull? What would happen?' And I had this fantasy about Mr Lowe getting really cross with this flat bull, that's why he tries to attack it with a fork, and his wife, she would have been doing the ironing, she was one of those people who irons all the time, so it all becomes flat, you know, the ironing's flat, the cap's flat, the bull's flat, the story's flat, I've come back, I'm deflated because I've come back like a big bull, 'Hey, I've been to Mexico, me'. 'Come on, we're not bothered', the kids were little at the time, you know, 'Come and help with this washing up' so it's that idea of like, I am the flat bull. [Laughs] I am the flat bull, that's what I've become. [Laughter] Oh yes.

Bill Greenwell

Is this a poem which, in the process of writing, you realised, actually, when you're in that kind of trance-like position of writing, that the flat cap and the iron would come in as well?

Ian McMillan

I'm honestly telling you this. I wrote it and afterwards noticed the cap was flat. And afterwards noticed the ironing flattened things. So that proves to me that maybe this kind of writing comes from a place beyond language and beyond thought. So you write the thing as a kind of riff or a kind of little anecdote or a kind of something that, you know, is about deflation. And afterwards, somebody pointed out and says, 'So he's got a flat cap on, like the bull?' And I thought, Do you know? [laughs] And then, 'I see the ironing's flat' and I really, I'm not being disingenuous, I hadn't noticed that. And that's because I think, you write in a trance-like state, you enter this trance-like state, you start banging away, and because you've read a lot of poems and because you listen to a lot of language and because you're obsessed with language, then little synapses are gonna come together and they're going to put a flat cap in, and the word flat iron, and the flat iron, and the iron that flattens things, you know, and it's because – you can see why really – I'd been writing the word flat a lot. I'd been writing the word flat a lot so, in my head, the word flat was bubbling away. The most unpromising material is the best, I think, because, you know, as a poet, you can turn it into pure gold. Because it's not the sort of stuff anybody else will have seen. You're standing on a bridge, you see a sunset, everybody can see the sunset, it's only you can see the chip wrapper down there, you know, and the fork. And that, somebody walking past who's got a bit of a scarf coming out of a pocket, you know, that's the kind of thing, and we should be open to all that.

Selima Hill's a great example though because Selima Hill, on the surface of it, sometimes is writing about nothing but at the same time, she's writing about everything. And she's allowing influences to come in and she lets the reader in, she lets the reader do some work. I'm a big fan of poets that I can't understand so that I can spend a bit of time with them, and get meanings out of it that they didn't intend to put in. I think sometimes we do treat poetry a bit

too much like Rubik cubes, where we go, 'Wait a minute, I've got it, clickety clickety click, I've lined them up, oh, wait a minute, wait a minute, it's a poem about moles'. You know, and you think, Well, all right, you could a told me that, I'd prefer it if the writer trusts the reader to play with their poems, just like they have, because, as soon as you've written it, while you're writing it, maybe it belongs to you, but as soon as you've written it, even if it's not published, it's somebody else's, let them have a look at it, let them see what they can do with it. Because reading is such a creative act, let them create it by reading.